

MSU Upper Peninsula Research and Extension Center: North Farm Apprentice Farmer Program

Evaluation Summary December 2018

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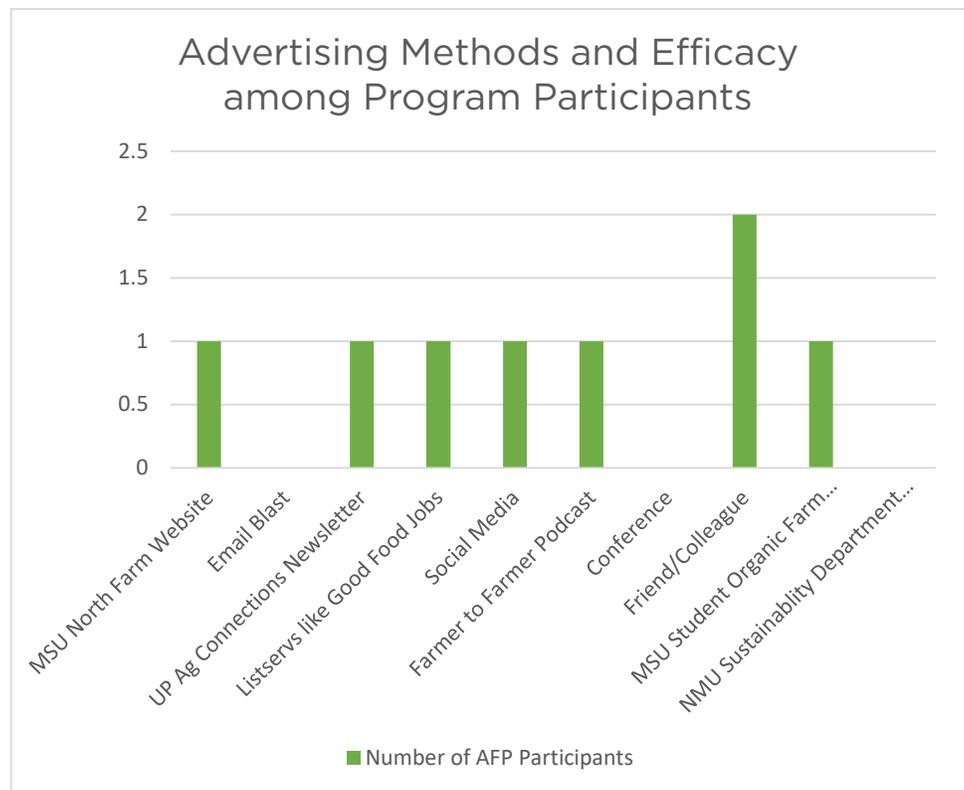
Since 2015, 5 farm businesses have participated in the Apprentice Farmer Program, farming 2 acres of the North Farm's 8 acres under active management. Each of these farm business startups came to the program with a business plan that outlined the markets they aimed to reach. The Downtown Marquette Farmers and Artisans Market was the most profitable market for these farms, and the majority of them participated in this market. Other markets included the Munising and Negaunee Farmers Markets. Relationships with 6 area restaurants have been developed, and the capacity for more exist. The program has explored the CSA model in two settings: Beanpole Farm conducted an individual CSA for 3 seasons, reaching a total of 43 families. The North Farm offered participants the opportunity to sell into a 50 person workplace CSA for a small, but guaranteed percentage of income during the growing season. A farm stand, operated on Fridays, June through October, at the North Farm site is stocked with produce from any program participant who wishes to be involved.

The following information was gathered from program participants – past and present – in December, 2018 via an online survey and a follow-up roundtable discussion.

How did participants hear about the program?

Some participants traveled from other states, while others joined the program from Marquette and Alger Counties. Avenues by which people were reached varied depending on their previous proximity to the farm. Participants indicated that the pre-acceptance interview with the North Farm Manager was a crucial component of their decision to attend the program.

The program has been advertised through the following approaches listed in the chart, and participants indicated how they found out about the program.



Expectations

Participants were asked to respond to how the program either met or did not meet their expectations, based on how the program was billed during their introduction to it.

According to one participant, the program "Offered a relatively low risk entry point into managing a farm business; access to affordable housing on site; access to just about every tool I was interested in; North Farm staff available to answer questions; fun environment and good camaraderie."

Participants indicated that:

- Available infrastructure and equipment exceeded expectations, though some additional improvement is needed to improve drainage and accessibility to fields

- Sweat equity provided a valuable opportunity to form a community of learners, and 4 hours of participation weekly was appropriate
- Cost of program was reasonable
- The AFP did not feel as important as other projects under the Farm Manager's supervision
- Access to mentorship, guidance, and expertise from farm staff was very important

Services

Services offered to AFP participants include:

- Access to organically managed land
- Equipment and hand tools
- Shared infrastructure: irrigation, wash and pack area, root washer, salad spinner, walk-in cooler, cellar, hoop house, transplant greenhouse, germination chamber, BCS tractor
- Subsidized on-site housing
- Access to markets
- Training in National Organic Program and USDA Good Agricultural Practices record keeping
- Farm business plan guidance
- Networking opportunities with other farmers
- Educational workshops

Participants ranked the top three items as the most important to their businesses. Here are a few additional comments:

The amount of infrastructure and tools available for use, including the greenhouse space, was way beyond what I could have ever asked for. The couple years North Farm offered to buy in for their CSA was also unexpected and very welcomed. As for the bad, I didn't expect to end up feeling like a burden on the NF manager, and our "weekly updates" turned into monthly, turned into yearly, turned into never. It would have been nice to not feel like I am constantly in the way of NF's production.

If we could have chosen another "most important thing" in the list above, it would have been mentorship - all of the time spent talking to staff provided invaluable information and peace of mind. It's hard to identify what would have made our first year better. This program has been pretty much perfect for where we're at in our farming career.

If we had come into this program with less experience than we did, we might have had a lot more questions about how to make a quarter or a half acre of land produce enough food to be a viable business, and because the North Farm operates at a different level than AFP participants are able to, it was sometimes hard to discuss our plans.

We were having dinner with the whole crew, and I left to go weed my potato bed because it was being swallowed by weeds. To my surprise, they came out and helped me. It was the nicest.

Sweat Equity was fun – it didn't matter if we were on the transplanter in the rain. It was that fun!

Ideas for Program Improvement

- Develop more community events, such as a monthly potluck for program participants and twilight tours of other farms in the area to build a stronger social network
- Designated "office hours" for Farm Manager to meet with participants (2 hours per week)
- Expanding the Farm Stand, which offers fresh, local produce on non-farmers market days, could benefit program participants and potentially other area farms
- Farm staff could facilitate restaurant and wholesale relationships through organizing a Meet and Greet with Taste the Local Difference
- Pursue funding to discount the cost of participant attendance at agricultural conferences, which would be an attractive addition to services we provide
- Program name is misleading – "apprentice" leads participants to believe that they will be working with an expert all day; Farm Business Incubator is a better description of the program.
- In addition to North Farm's production techniques for wholesale markets, offer a ¼ acre model of the bed dimensions and crop ix for a small scale market garden.